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ABSTRACT

This paper relates the experiences of the United States and selected Eastern European and Asian countries in incorporating multiculturalism into their educational systems. It begins by discussing political and social roots of the multicultural experience. It continues by examining multilinguistic education, including the development and use of indigenous languages. The paper then states that the educational inclusiveness of European countries in which there are two strong ethnic groups differs from the approach in the United States. The paper concludes that at this educational juncture, the United States can learn from European and Asian countries by observing how former "minority" cultures are incorporated, by observing how sensitivity is needed for the expectations of those entering a new culture, and by asking what priority should be put on multiple language learning. (EF)

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by Donna M. Ogle

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Multiculturalism: Cross-national Reflections

Donna M. Ogle

Issues of multiculturalism and questions about how American schools and teachers respond to the reality of an increasingly multicultural society are important. We need to reflect on what we are doing to prepare teachers to adjust to this diverse, multicultural context. Since many young teachers come from suburban and more homogeneous communities attention to how we prepare teachers and how we provide for the diversity of cultures in our schools deserves a major place in our discussions of how best to prepare teachers and create the conditions for optimal learning for all students.

We are an increasingly diverse country, with increases in both traditional ethnic populations and new groups settling in the US. We are also becoming a somewhat more sensitive culture. Many schools (from the primary level through university graduate study) are modifying their curriculum and approaches to reflect the diversity that is America. In some colleges and universities we are now teaching courses in ethnic histories and cultural diversity, including multicultural literature and study of authors representing the richness of the world's literature, and asking pre-service education students to experience teaching in diverse settings (a la Richard's experience in Mississippi). We are asking questions about diversity in our research programs and at conferences like NRC.

It is an interesting paradox to also be working on a literacy project in Eastern Europe and Asia at this time. While we in the US are trying to create a larger sense of what it means to be American – to include many more variations within our single identity and find ways to honor our diversity within a single unity – a very different political phenomenon is happening in Europe and Asia. With the breakup of the former

Soviet Union new nations are now having to create new identities and among other things, establish education systems for themselves.

Working in some of these countries with the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) project has provided a mirror through which I can reflect on our own experiences with multiculturalism. During the past two years volunteer teams of literacy professionals recruited through the International Reading Association have provided 8 mini-courses to educators in former Soviet bloc countries. Each team of 4 visits the country over a 3 year period to provide information and model instruction as well as to follow-up by visiting schools and working with the leadership within the countries to "institutionalize" the changes. After working as a volunteer in Russia and Romania and serving as a coordinator last year I have been able to see some of the variety that exists within these 20 countries. The reflections I include in this paper are more personal than scholarly and I hope they will create some discussion among our group. Just to explain a bit about that project, RWCT

What have I observed? One political change is very clear. Stinging from years of domination by Russia, some of the former Soviet Union countries and its satellites are now demanding that their ethnicity be recognized. Rather than becoming expansive in creating a new shared identity, what is happening is the creation of small countries carved out according to centuries old ethnicities.

. The new nations that have been formed in the last ten years reflect the unequal power relations of the former Soviet Union. They represent the resurgence of ethnic identity and ethnic exclusivity. A survey of the area shows the powerful urges to assert identity. Yugoslavia, for example, couldn't hold together as one country even though it

had been on the fringe of the Soviet hegemony. Even Czechoslovakia splintered into smaller states. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became independent small countries again.. Macedonia formed a national state carved from within the mountains separating it on all sides. Kazakstan was created as a new, independent state in central Asia. These countries are at a very different stage of their development than we are in the U.S.

Within these new countries there has also been the need to create systems of education. Naturally the experiences of the Soviet period form the basis from which the new systems have been created. In some cases that means a rejection of what went on before, in others there are other patterns of adaptation. Even within Russia there are tensions over what to maintain from the old system and what to change. The pride the Russians have had over their educational achievements is a very real force that makes changes for some even more difficult.

Since my experiences are very limited I will draw on work in Russia, Romania, and Estonia and conversations with volunteer professionals from some of the other countries. Since my husband is on the team to Kazakstan his experiences are included and offer a contrast from a central Asian country. I have also interviewed a few participants from the countries for this reflection to insure that I am not too narrow in my observations. During this period (1997-99) I have also been able to visit schools in Finland where a dual education system exists for both Swedish-language and Finnish language students.

The current U.S. experience of multiculturalism has both political and social roots. So, too, the decisions that are being made in Europe and Asia about how to provide education are steeped in their history. While the current political and

educational landscape, with many small, new nations, may seem strange to us – it certainly has rational as well as emotional roots. The Soviet intent was to create a single system of education for all of the Soviet Union (although they did at various times evidence strong respect for ethnic groups within the USSR) with Russian language used throughout. This meant that education across the wide expanse of the Soviet Union was conducted in the Russian language, with textbooks written in Russian and from the central education agencies. All educated students learned in Russian and studied at universities where Russian was the language of instruction and writing.

As in our country, there have been different theories of how best to teach children to read, but in Russia we learned from teachers that they thought the content of the instructional programs should be based in good Russian literature. Educators valued teaching with real literature so even in the primary grades "classical" stories and materials written by great authors was what children read. When teachers hold this value, the ethnic identity, languages and literature of other cultures was submerged. In fact, as one of my interviewees from Russia (a Jewish woman who has suffered under the anti-Jewish policies) put it, "no attention is paid to ethnic minorities" in literature study. It was as if they had no literature or literacy worthy of study.

The question of which languages to use for instruction was one that the USSR had to face. Heated debates over the role of ethnic minorities, particularly within Russia, had leaders split over this and other issues. Some wanted to honor the minorities, others wanted to create one, new Soviet identity. (If we think we have a multicultural society some study of the diversity within Russia is interesting and can put our situation in a broader context.)

While Soviets wanted all students to use Russian they also prioritized the learning of other languages. Even now this commitment to language learning continues. We have visited special language schools where study begins in first grade. In one Moscow school we visited students begin first grade with the study of German and then in 2 years begin English. In St. Petersburg, in a normal elementary (primary) school we had conversations with seventh year students in English. While done with lots of giggles and in halting English it was impressive that the students were able to converse with us in our language. Language study is begin in most schools by fourth grade and most add a third language by sixth or seventh grade. This commitment to language learning is impressive when I consider the contrast to our U.S. priority on second or third language learning.

Issues of language learning are important, as we know from the North American debates over bilingualism and ESL. Within the former Soviet system there were many debates, too. The use of the Russian language for instruction across the Soviet bloc helped create more consistent education . However, this has created bad feelings in some countries (Romania and Estonia, for example) since native languages were therefore not developed in schools. During my visits to Romania I spoke with people who refuse to use Russian even when they know it.

Part of this process of creating a single culture involved moving people throughout the system, too. We have met many highly educated leaders in the countries of RWCT who went to Moscow for graduate study. At the same time many Russians were moved to the far reaches of the USSR to settle and infuse the areas with Russian leadership. Estonia is one small country where the huge infusion of Russians has created a very divided society – those Russian speakers who now don't want to return to Russia

and the Estonians who were dominated and discriminated against throughout the Communist period.

Kazakstan is another example of an area, now a country, settled by many Russians. In both Estonia and Kazakstan there are now questions about education since the former system was all in Russian by Russians. The current states have other languages and cultures of their own – Estonian and Kazak. How do they move forward with this history of cultural difference being based in a powerful and often-hated political system? What new visions are being created to deal with "multiculturalism" in their new education systems. What these two countries "know" is education in one language supporting one political and social system. It will be interesting to follow their development as they create new approaches to the diversity within their own countries.

We see different patterns emerging in these countries as they struggle with how to create new educational systems. In Kazakstan developing a bilingual system is one of their goals. That means developing a Kazak language system with materials and teachers trained in Kazak and then blending it with the Russian system that has been in place. Our RWCT project has felt the clear impact of this dual system since the first group of volunteers went to the Russian language schools. By the second year of the project we were asked to create a new team with responsibilities for the Kazak language schools. Both systems are designed to honor the language of the other while providing basic instruction in the selected language.

In other countries the drive for recognition and identity that has led to the use of or even development of indigenous language and in some cases the redevelopment of written language. In Macedonia there is now a nation but there are very few books

written in the Macedonian language. Teachers are writing books so there can be education in Macedonia. (conversation with Jill Lewis, RWCT volunteer in Macedonia) The same is true in Kazakstan. The Kazak language was forbidden in the schools under Russian rule. Now, independent the government has set up two school systems – one in Kazak and the other still in Russian. Since there are so many Russians in the country they compromised and have 2 sets of schools. This is also true in Estonia where the two systems exist side by side. This pattern is also true in other European countries where ethnic groups maintain their language and culture over generations. In Romania we have worked in Romanian language schools, but in the Transylvania area there are both schools in Romanian and in Hungarian. We also have teachers from the German language schools. Rather than become part of a single country culture, the ethnic groups maintain their identity in their schools and language. So, one move we have seen is the reassertion of local national language within the culture and schools.

These differences in dealing with multiple languages are intersting. In some countries where there are two strong language and cultural groups schools are set up with both systems, recognizing the culture and language of these ethnic minorities. This is a different orientation that we have in the U.S. where we have had a history of wanting to integrate into the majority system rather trying to integrate the minority into the majority system I did not find instances of second language instruction as a tool to joining the two cultures. I did not encounter our distinctions of ESL and Sheltered English or Bilingual Education as part of the eastern European landscape. That does not mean that in some countries or areas such programs are not in place. It is clear that there is a history of separate schools for speakers of different languages in some European

countries even outside the Soviet bloc. In Finland, for example, historic Swedish-language and cultural communities have a separate set of schools from the Finnish-language schools. Families can put their children in either type of school. This has great advantages for those who want to maintain their own language and culture even when within a society that is different. The liability is that there is no opportunity to be part of a "melting pot" and adopt the majority culture, the history of immigrant homogenization within the U.S.

What can we learn from these experiences? First, looking at multicultural issues from outside our own country made me realize even more clearly how very little I know about the actual experiences that have affected other cultural groups. I have vowed to be more open to listening and learning. The different experiences and programs developed over the years by countries to provide education for multicultural contexts have led to a variety of options. At this juncture in history we in the U.S. are experiencing much of the same tension other countries face. We can learn much as we look at some of the differences in response. Some contrasts regarding multiculturalism are very clear, however. As I reflect on these paths three questions emerge.

First, what are the lessons we can learn from the former "minority" cultures in the USSR? Many of these cultures were not allowed to express their own heritage through the formal education system: they could not use their own language for instruction nor was their history taught in the curriculum. The literature of their groups was often not included in the curriculum. Now they are reasserting these rights. What does this tell us about minority groups even in our own society? Does it cause us to recall our treatment of Native Americans in the past when we refused to even allow

Native children to use their own mother tongue to speak together in boarding schools? What does it remind us of today as we develop programs and approaches to the increasing diversity within our midst? Do we inadvertently in the U.S. contribute to other culture's resistance to our system of education through our policies? I know I have heard hispanic families speak of the need for "respeto" or respect as a foundation of communication. How can that be expressed most clearly? How do we express respect for other cultures and their values and achievements? How do we respect the members of cultural groups different from us?

Second, when families come into our schools from other systems in Europe and Asia do we help build bridges for their expectations? Since systems are so different and past experiences so disparate I wonder what impressions we give to others coming into our schools. How can we help create a positive understanding of our aims and expectations? I have been struck in our short visits to other countries through RWCT and other work abroad that our life experiences are very different in some fundamental ways. Yet, we often don't want to explore these differences in our desire to see everyone as similar. When children enter our schools we may be too eager to help them assimilate without recognizing the need to also find their uniqueness and the experiences that shape how they interpret and respond.

One example may be illustrative. We are very involved in process writing in this country. We like to begin with personal writing. However, for people raised under very threatening conditions, where revealing one's own ideas and values could lead to imprisonment or worse, our asking them to write freely their own ideas may be very insensitive. If survival was dependent on hiding one's self we may ask too much. In

some countries when the RWCT writing experiences were begun people refused to share their pieces. They did not want to reveal themselves publicly. How do we respond to these different experiences?

In another situation we tried to use short predicable books. The first question was, "Who wrote this? Is it a respectable author?" We don't require tested authors for materials we use with young children. Yet, that was a criteria in Russia as we worked with a group of teachers of primary children. At first I was confused when the teachers pushed the question of "Who wrote this book?" What did it matter? Yet, as I listened I realized they were expressing an important value. Children deserved quality literature so they would appreciate the value of reading Transporting our values in education is not easy. We need to be open to listening to the criteria that are deeply imbedded in others' experiences. Then the dialogues can be meaningful. Then we can learn much from our exchanges. Then our multiculturalism can take on new dimensions.

Third, what priority should we put on the learning of languages other than English? Do we limit our teachers when we don't include second or third languages in their preparation? Should we reemphasize language study as part of our elementary and university curriculum? Does the study of other cultures and their literature build a bridge to other languages?

Working outside the United States has been most rewarding. The mirror it has provided leaves me looking at lots of aspects of my own self and our educational system that I never noticed much before. It is raising many questions! I hope these reflections

and questions can be part of an expanding dialog about our educational responses to the rich multiculturalism of America at the millenium.